



The Future of Water Sources: Investigating Changes in Ion Concentrations and Alkalinity of Meltwater from the Llewellyn Glacier, Juneau Icefield.

Proposed by Hannah Watt

An expedition to the Juneau Icefield, Alaska, USA, and British Columbia, Canada

Supported by Durham University Expeditions Group



The Juneau Icefield Research Program



The Full Expedition

The research project was conducted alongside the Juneau Icefield Research Program (JIRP). Running since 1946, JIRP is North America's longest operating polar research program, with a 78-year legacy (Connor, 2009). Founded to conduct novel research on the Taku Glacier (Miller, 1953; Heusser, 2007), the program has slowly expanded to research further areas of the icefield, with an 8-week long expedition traversing across the icefield from Juneau, Alaska, USA, to Atlin, British Columbia, Canada. The 2024 expedition ran from the 10th of June to the 9th of August 2024, with a total of 53 days spent in the field. The program overall is designed to develop successful careers as researchers in extreme and remote environments, combining academia with skills in mountaineering and fieldwork.

JIRP was invaluable in providing the opportunity for me to access this landscape, as I had never seen snow before the expedition! The first two weeks were spent learning skiing and mountaineering skills, such as using crampons, crevasse rescue, navigation and group leadership. I am now very excited for future expeditions in this environment, and have begun pursuing climbing and caving at university to continue developing these skills.



32 students joined from across the world, ranging from high school to PhD, coming from backgrounds spanning chemical engineering to paleoclimatology. The expedition was also supported by 9 staff members in the field and 3 town staff members who coordinated the logistics and safety of the expedition throughout the summer. A total of 35 faculty members rotated through the summer, with an average of 9 members at each camp, who taught lectures, led workshops, provided fieldwork opportunities and supported reading groups and assignments.

The Journey Across the Icefield

The expedition travelled north-east across the Juneau Icefield, starting from the town of Juneau, Alaska, USA to Atlin, British Columbia, Canada, a small town across Atlin Lake. Figure 1 maps out the location of each camp, which were full size, permanent camps to hold 50 people. We spent an average of ten days at each camp, with 2-3 days either side for travelling to the next camp in small trail parties, with a maximum of two trail-parties moving each day. Out of the 6 traverse days, only the journey from Camp 17 to Camp 10 took two days, with a night spent at a makeshift camp at Norris Cache. This covered 40 miles, while the remaining traverses averaged at 20 miles.

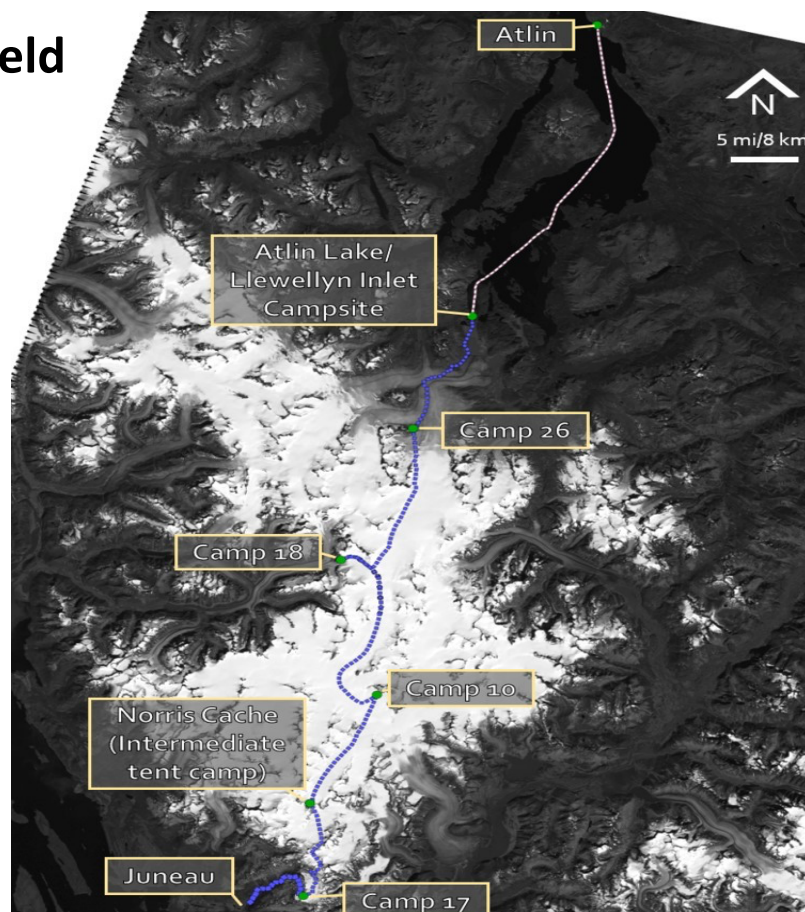


Figure 1: A map of the Juneau Icefield traverse and the major icefield camps. Credit: Allen Pope.

Life on the Icefield

The 'Plan of the Day' (known as POD) laid out the schedule of each day filled with lectures, fieldwork and the general running's of camp life. Wake-up each day began at 07.30 before breakfast at 08:00 and morning meeting with the whole camp at 08:30. We all completed work detail from 09:00 to 10:00 in order to upkeep camp, including tasks such as can crushing, sweeping, refuelling gas, and the most desirable job, cleaning outhouses. By 10:30, those going out for the day would begin travelling to each destination, often over an hour ski from the camp. The day would be spent in the field until 18:00, focusing on employing instrumentation or digging mass balance pits. Lectures and workshops would often run in conjunction back at camp, before an evening lecture at 20:30 for an hour given by faculty. Lights went out at 23:00, at which point we were all eager for sleep!



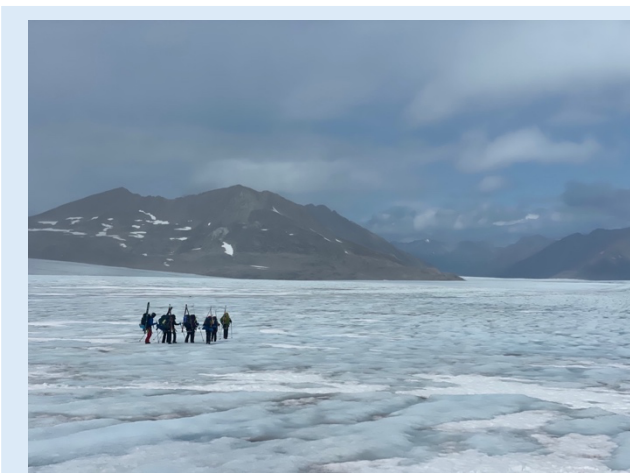
Independent Research Project

Introduction

The Future of Water Sources: Investigating Changes in Ion Concentrations and Alkalinity of the Llewellyn Glacier, Juneau Icefield

Glacial environments are experiencing some of the earliest and greatest impacts of climate change (Chen, 2021; Palomo, 2017). In the Arctic, where climate amplification is leading to warming above the global average, terrestrial and marine pollution is encroaching on formerly pristine environments, and fragile Arctic ecosystems are suffering extensive destruction (Chevallier *et al.*, 2011). With glaciers containing ~70% of global freshwater (Barkdull *et al.*, 2021; Arendt, 2015), it is critical that we analyse changes to the biogeochemical properties of meltwater as it flows down to the ablation zone, due to its long-term implications for agriculture, livelihoods, and ecosystems downstream. It is more important now than ever to understand the implications of glacial ice loss to ensure future water security (Carey *et al.*, 2017; World Health Organization, 2016).

Rivers in glacierized catchments commonly contain high concentrations of dissolved ions, mostly derived from chemical weathering of bedrock and unlithified sediments (Chien *et al.*, 2018), and from the atmosphere, deposited by rain or snow (Benn and Evans, 2014; Young *et al.*, 2021). Cations are positively charged atoms or molecules, while anions are negatively charged ions (*ibid.*). Commonly dissolved cations include calcium, sodium, potassium and magnesium (Sharp and Tranter, 2017). Anions include bicarbonate, sulphate, nitrate and chlorine (Tranter *et al.*, 1996). Solutes can be used as natural tracers that can help identify water sources and flow routing (Benn and Evans, 2014) as concentrations increase as the water chemically weathers bedrock while flowing further down the glacier (Chien *et al.*, 2018). Warming temperatures due to climate change can increase the base-level ion concentration and alkalinity in the long-term due to an increased volume of meltwater from melting ice and a shift to a warm-based glacier (Arendt, 2015). Concerningly, atmospherically deposited trace metals have also been found in meltwater, including mercury and zinc (Hawking *et al.*, 2021; Barkdull *et al.*, 2021). Alkalinity determines the water's ability to neutralise acidic pollution from rainfall or snowmelt, influencing the uptake of toxic compounds by aquatic flora and fauna (UMass, 2024).



Independent Research Project

Study Site

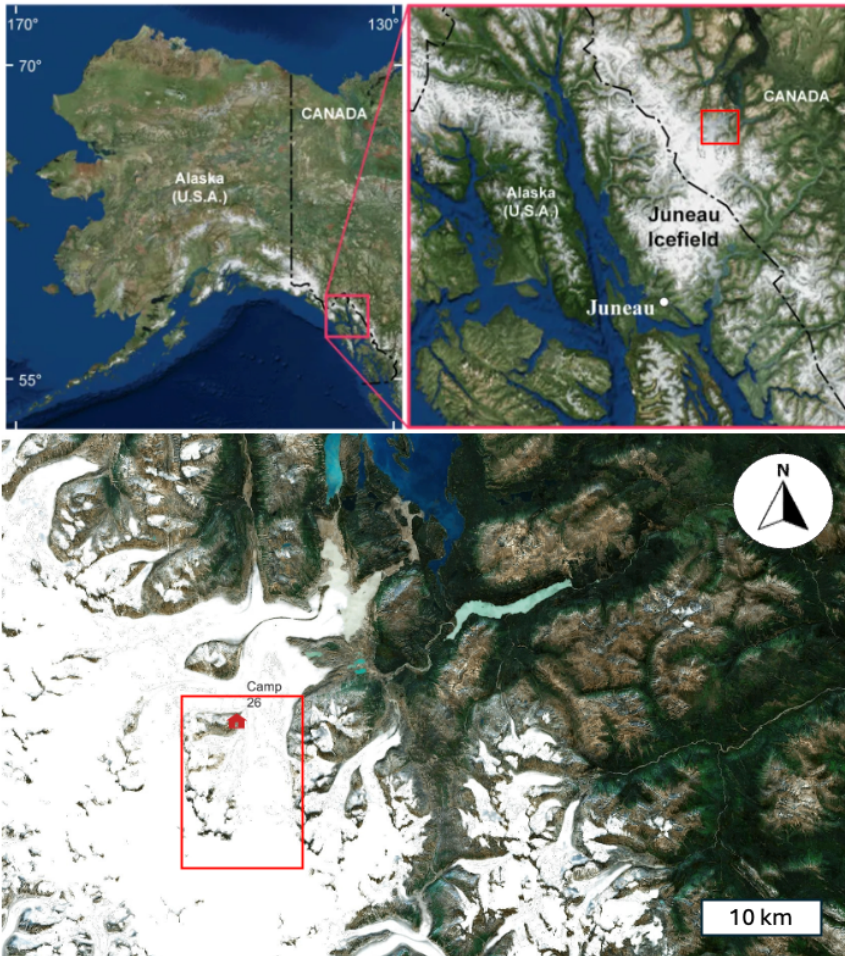


Figure 2: An increasingly zoomed in map locating the Llewellyn Glacier on the Juneau Icefield. Credit: Google Earth

Camp 26, located on the nunatak of Corona Peak, Llewellyn Glacier, BC, is the final camp located on the icefield, and became the base where I and fellow students and faculty members stayed during data collection. This camp is only accessible by foot, with the total journey taking approximately 7 days, traversing across 75 miles. Each study site was at a maximum an hour hike from the camp, for ease of access and safety. Examining other glaciers while travelling across the icefield, such as the Taku Glacier at Camp 10, has deepened my understanding of the environment and additional research areas.

The Llewellyn Glacier is located in north-western British Columbia, Canada, forming an outlet glacier on the northeast of the Juneau Icefield. The Llewellyn Glacier is the second largest glacier on the icefield (Pelto, 2017). It has three piedmont lobes, of which the east lobe calves into an 11.9 km² proglacial lake (Gilbert *et al.*, 2006). Glacial meltwater also feeds directly into the 791 km² Atlin Lake, and then into the Yukon River (Clague, Koch and Geertsema, 2010). Meltwater therefore feeds directly into water sources travelling further downstream, which is why the Llewellyn was selected for this research. Already, the Juneau Icefield has seen 63 glaciers disappear since 2005, with a 22 km² (10.0%) reduction in glacier area (Davies *et al.*, 2022).



Figure 3: JIRP owns three buildings to host researchers while studying the Llewellyn Glacier. Photograph by Daniel Otto.

Independent Research Project

Methodology

In order to examine ion concentrations and alkalinity, I collected vials of meltwater to be transported and examined at Durham University. In total, 50 10ml filtered samples and 31 150ml unfiltered samples were collected. While in the field, I took additional measurements on Dissolved Oxygen and pH using two probes provided by Durham University, as well as noting the width, depth and debris content at each site.

Remote sensing will be used additionally for secondary data analysis to map surface hydrology and structural glaciology to supplement my knowledge on the hydrological system. I will examine data from a variety of sources, including the World Glacier Inventory, World Glacier Monitoring Service, Global Land Ice Measurements from Space and the Randolph Glacier Inventory.

Limitations

In the field, I encountered difficulties with both probes, and while I attempted fix them with limited resources, I will be undertaking additional analysis in the lab where possible. The weight limitations of the helicopter presented an issue transporting the samples off the icefield, however the staff very generously carried additional weight while hiking to make space for the samples, which I am incredibly grateful for.

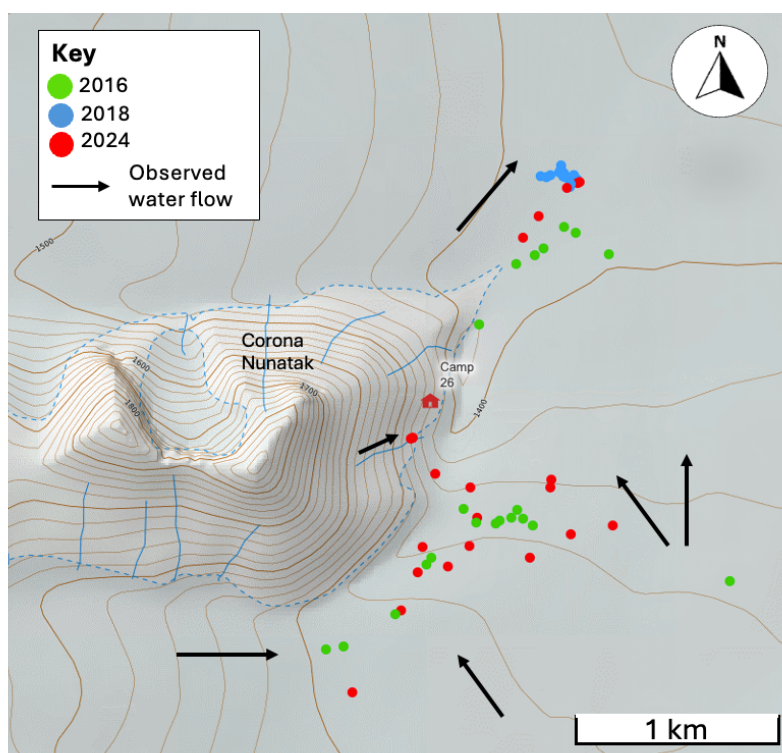


Figure 4: Map to show sampling locations across three years (2016, 2018 and 2024) on the Llewellyn Glacier around Corona Nunatak

Sampling strategy

I collected samples over four days (31/07-03/08), accessing four zones of the glacier to analyse spatial variations. One of the zones changed unexpectedly as the site is no longer safe to access, so I chose to travel further northeast to collect samples. Similarly, sites north of Corona Peak, the focus of 2018 sampling, were particularly difficult to find streams located in the same location due to the nature of stream patterns changing annually.

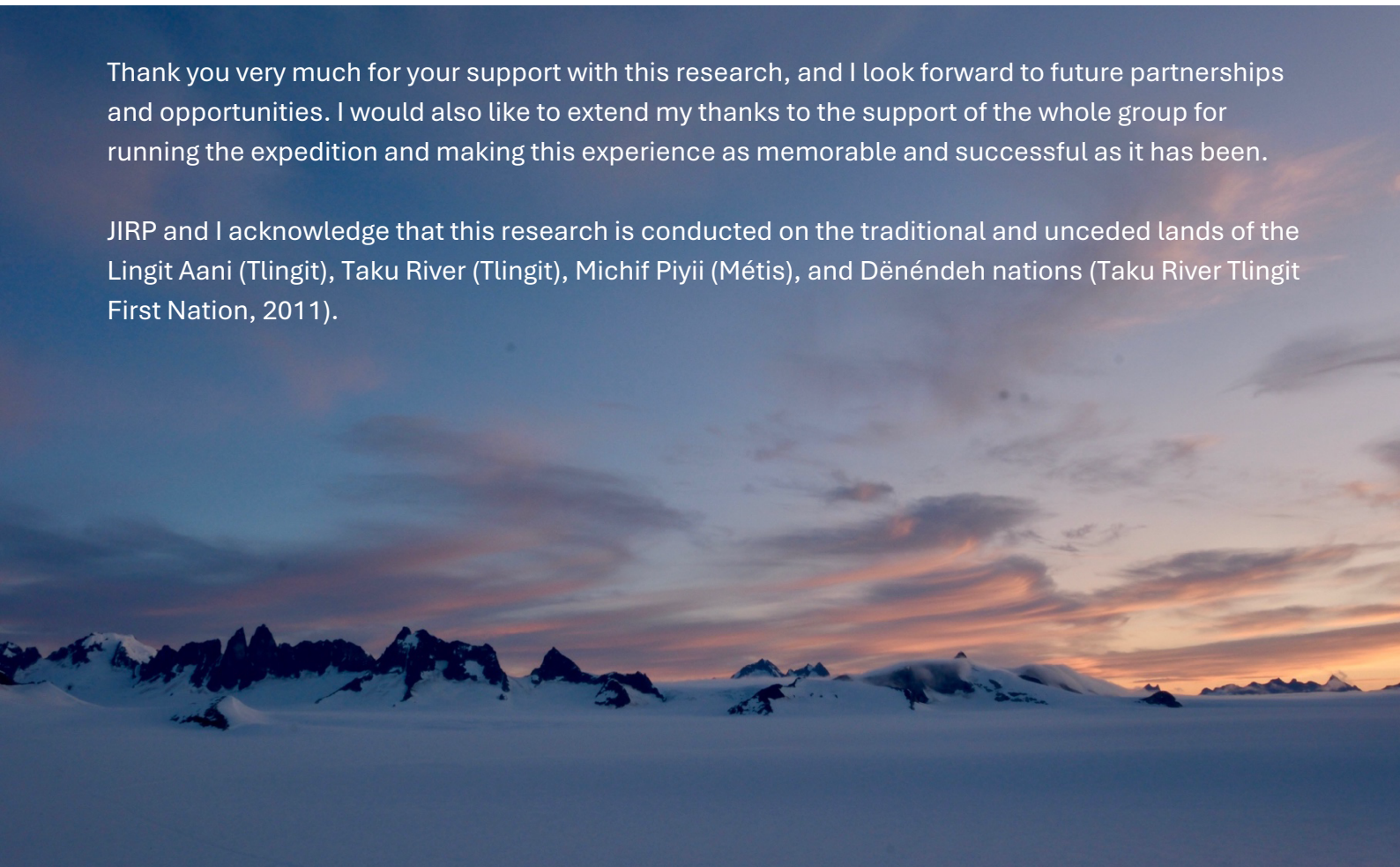
To limit the contamination of samples, I collected water while sitting downstream, wearing rubber gloves and a synthetic jacket and trousers.



Moving forward with this research, I will continue with primary and secondary data analysis and figure production, with the full report aiming to be completed by April as part of my undergraduate dissertation. Findings can later be integrated with perceptual information and traditional knowledge from indigenous communities, and thereby support locally appropriate water management strategies (Okumah *et al.*, 2020). While in Atlin, I presented my findings to the local community in an evening in which all participants shared their experience and expertise. I also filmed my experience on the expedition and hope to make this into a short documentary film, with an aim to distribute this by the summer of 2025.

Thank you very much for your support with this research, and I look forward to future partnerships and opportunities. I would also like to extend my thanks to the support of the whole group for running the expedition and making this experience as memorable and successful as it has been.

JIRP and I acknowledge that this research is conducted on the traditional and unceded lands of the Lingit Aani (Tlingit), Taku River (Tlingit), Michif Piyii (Métis), and Dënéndeh nations (Taku River Tlingit First Nation, 2011).



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